

A network of mentors, internationally and within Ireland, are available to help your business.

Someone to lean on

REPEAT USER OF THE MENTOR NETWORK

One such start-up is Somex, a company that develops specialised laboratory testing equipment for the beverage industry and has become a repeat user of the mentor programme.

Founders Brian O’Keeffe and Michael Wall have a combined 40 years experience in automation design, and process improvement, working for the multinational sector. But when they set out to launch Somex, they were less confident about their marketing and sales, and participating in an enterprise start-up programme, they teamed up with Brian Crumplin as their first mentor.

“We were so focused on working *in* the company, we, at times, neglected working *on* the company,” O’Keeffe recalls. “The monthly mentoring sessions forced us to stand back and take a bigger picture view of where we were going. Brian would give us ‘homework,’ setting goals for our next meeting. Typically these would involve tackling things outside our comfort zone, like pricing, marketing, sales meetings, branding etc. The fact that we would be seeing him again forced us to look at them.”

O’Keeffe and Wall were somewhat fortunate, as their contacts in the industry led their first customer - Pepsi Cola in Cork – to approach them. The next step was to use that foot in the door to sell to Pepsi internationally and also to start winning business from other big players in the industry. So they sought a second year of mentoring sessions, this time with a marketing professional to help them develop their website, trademark and brochure-ware.

“Again, as technical guys, we were concentrating on the benefits from a mechanical or an engineering perspective,” O’Keeffe says. The mentor’s big breakthrough, he believes, was to steer them towards highlighting the benefits to the customer as opposed to the features of the machine.

The approach obviously worked. Somex now counts Pepsi Cola internationally, as well as Cola Coca, Britvic and C&C among its clients, with



“THE MONTHLY MENTORING SESSIONS FORCED US TO STAND-BACK AND TAKE A BIGGER PICTURE VIEW OF WHERE WE WERE GOING.”

BRIAN O’KEEFFE
CO-FOUNDER, SOMEX

customers in 20 countries on three continents.

The company is currently moving into its next phase of evolution, having entered into an innovation partnership with University College Cork. And to leverage on the knowledge that will come from this process, Somex is applying for its third mentor – ideally someone with experience translating R&D outputs into increased sales, O’Keeffe says.

HOW THE MENTORING PROCESS WORKS

Within the Irish mentor network, the available skill-set ranges from production and R&D to marketing, business plan development and HR, and it spans the services, software, consultancies, environment, life science, engineering, food and consumer goods industry. So matching can be based on functional skills or sectoral interest.

But this is only part of the equation, insists Charlie Kelly: “There is an internationally recognised hypothesis that good management practice is 90 per cent generic and just 10 per cent

sector specific. What is most important is to ensure the people we pair will get along together. We want chalk with chalk rather than chalk with cheese.”

The service costs the client company nothing. (Enterprise Ireland pays the mentor a small daily rate and out-of-pocket expenses). Any one mentoring session allows for a maximum of ten visits per year and, typically, the mentor spends two to three hours per visit with the client, with additional communication via email and phone. The goals to be achieved during the year are established by the client in agreement with the mentor at the outset, and once these objectives have been completed, there is a possibility of extending the service for another year. After all, at times, we all need someone to lean on. **M**

To find out more about teaming up with a mentor, talk to your development advisor or contact Charlie Kelly, Mentor Network Manager, Tel +353 1 2066410, email charlie.kelly@enterprise-ireland.com